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### Original Article

## WHY DID THE WOMAN CROSS THE ROAD? THE EFFECT OF SEXIST HUMOR ON MEN'S RAPE PROCLIVITY

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### Abstract

Previous research has shown that exposure to sexist (vs. non-sexist) humor results in more tolerance of sexist discrimination (Ford & Fergusson, 2004). In the current research, three studies investigated the effects of exposure to sexist humor on men's rape proclivity. In Study 1, male students were exposed to either sexist or non-sexist jokes. Males exposed to sexist jokes reported higher levels of rape proclivity in comparison to males exposed to non-sexist jokes. Study 2 was an online study in which we replicated Study 1, but also measured male participants' levels of hostile and benevolent sexism. Study 3 was a replication of Study 2, in which we controlled for the sexual content of the jokes. Overall, the results of Study 2 and Study 3 indicated that men who scored high (vs. low) on hostile sexism reported higher levels of rape proclivity after exposure to sexist versus non-sexist jokes. No such effects were obtained for benevolent sexism.

**Keywords:** Hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, sexist jokes, humor, rape proclivity

### Introduction

Rape cultures are defined by sets of beliefs and values that provide an environment conducive to rape (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993). Rape cultures are based on abusive attitudes toward women as well as traditional gender scripts. Assumptions of male aggression and dominance and female acquiescence and passivity (Buchwald et al., 1993) as well as contempt for female qualities (e.g., Sanday, 1981), rape myths (Carmody & Washington, 2001; Frese, Moya, & Megías, 2004) and ambiguities about what constitutes rape and how to define consent (Basow & Minieri, 2011) sustain rape cultures. Factors further contributing to rape cultures are alcohol and drug use and male peer pressure to demean women and encourage gender segregation (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). These factors, in turn, feed back into the promotion of a rape culture, which promotes rapes on a cultural as well as on

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local levels.

Rape cultures impact on and are perpetuated by women as much as by men. As Brownmiller (1975) points out, women are inhabitants of a male-dominated culture, which is supportive of rape myths and restrictive beliefs about women's roles, which may encourage women to accept their role as "gatekeepers" of sexual interaction, rendering them responsible for their own victimization (Bridges, 1991). Basow and Minieri (2011) demonstrate that both sexes contribute to muting victimized women, thus perpetuating a culture in which rape becomes part of the social milieu. While female rape victims tend to question the effectiveness of their efforts to communicate lack of consent, they and their friends avoid labeling incidents of sexual violence as rape by contending that particularly date and acquaintance rapes happen under ambiguous circumstances (Basow & Minieri, 2011). Although women largely reject rape myths, Carmody and Washington (2001) found that the myth that women falsely report rape due to a need to call attention to themselves was surprisingly high among female participants. In addition, women can contribute to the continuation of sexual violence through victim blame (Cowan, 2000). Again, these beliefs sustain toleration of sexual violence against women and perpetuate rape cultures (Cowan, 2000).

The negative impact of rape and other forms of sexual violence on the daily lives of women cannot be over-emphasized (Day, 1995). Several studies have shown that both victimized and non-victimized women suffer psychologically and emotionally from the social reality of sexual violence (see Bohner & Schwarz, 1996, for a review). Despite these findings, a sizable proportion of males have been found to report some proclivity towards sexual violence (Malamuth, 1981). These findings have been obtained in studies using self-report measures of rape proclivity (e.g. Bohner, Schwarz, Rutz, Sturm, Kerschbaum, & Effler, 1998). Some of the early measures asked men to indicate the likelihood that they would rape if they were guaranteed of not being caught (Malamuth, 1981; Malamuth & Check, 1985; Quackenbush, 1989). The research presented here will use Bohner et al.'s (1998) self-report measure of rape proclivity mentioned above. Ethical boundaries prevent us from assessing male rape proclivity more directly. Thus, any findings presented in the current research do not present data on actual rapes but male participants' self-reported likelihood to exert sexual violence similar to the scenarios provided by Bohner et al. (1998). Within our chosen research paradigm, we propose that there is a link between the behavior participants report and their actual behavior.

Using the above measures, researchers have identified several factors that are related to men's proclivity to commit sexual violence against women. For example, the combination of hostility towards women, attitudes accepting of violence against women, and sexual arousal in response to aggression have been found to be significantly linked to sexual aggression (Malamuth, 1986). Studies by Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, and Tanaka (1991) and Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, and Acker (1995) confirmed the joint impact of hostile masculinity and impersonal sex (sexual promiscuity) on sexual coerciveness. Cultural factors impacting on male rape proclivity further include rape myths as held by society and women's status within society (e.g., Burt, 1980), a general hostility toward women (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995), and cultural myths and metaphors as well as legal definitions of rape (Donat & White, 2000). Moreover, the interaction of individual factors - such as rape myth acceptance - along with situational factors - such as the stereotypicality of the rape - can work together to alter perceptions and judgments of rape (Frese et al., 2004). In this paper, we report three studies that further examine the conditions under which men are likely to report high levels of rape proclivity.

### *Hostile Sexism and Sexual Violence*

Unlike previous sexism researchers, Glick and Fiske (1996) proposed that sexism does not constitute a unitary hostility towards women. Rather, sexist attitudes are proposed to be ambivalent, consisting of both hostile and benevolent feelings. According to Glick and Fiske (1996) hostile sexism (HS) comprises of the negative feelings and evaluations that are typically associated with sexist attitudes. In contrast, benevolent sexism (BS) is defined by Glick and Fiske (1996) as “a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone” (p. 491). Glick and Fiske (1996) developed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), which consists of HS and BS subscales. This scale has been validated in a number of studies in a variety of countries (e.g. Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick et al, 2000; Masser & Abrams, 1999).

In line with Glick and Fiske’s (1996) predictions, HS has been shown to be related to negative attitudes and behaviors toward women. The studies on HS have so far demonstrated two important effects. First, HS is related to negative evaluations of women who violate traditional gender role norms (Glick et al.; 2000; Masser & Abrams, 1999). Second, HS is strongly related to negative and sometimes violent behavioral propensities against women. This second effect is the focus of the current series of studies.

Glick, Sakalli-Uğurlu, Ferreira and de Souza (2002) showed that in Turkey and Brazil, ambivalent sexism is related to attitudes legitimizing wife abuse. More favorable attitudes towards patriarchy and high hostile sexism in men predicted acceptability of wife beating and blame for eliciting this violence (Sakalli-Uğurlu, 2001). Benevolent sexism, in contrast, predicted negative views of women who engage in premarital sex, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles and the status quo (Sakalli-Uğurlu & Glick, 2003).

A relationship between HS and rape proclivity has also been identified. In a series of empirical studies, Abrams, Viki, Masser, and Bohner (2003) found that HS, but not BS, was a stable predictor of male self-reported likelihood of raping in acquaintance rape situations (Abrams et al., 2003, Study 2). Viki, Chiroro, and Abrams (2006) replicated these findings using an African sample. Abrams et al. (2003, Study 4) further established that the link between HS and rape proclivity in acquaintance rape situations is mediated by the perception that the victim wanted to have sex but showed token resistance in order to appear chaste. In Abrams et al.’s (2003) research, BS was not found to be predictive of rape proclivity. Instead, individuals high in BS tended to attribute more blame to victims of acquaintance rape than did individuals low in BS.

The current research further examines factors that may influence male self-reported rape proclivity. In this research, an effort is made to follow Brownmiller’s (1975) plea for researchers to focus on elements within our culture that may be supportive of rape. Ford and Ferguson (2004) argue that sexist or racist jokes provide an opportunity to establish local norms that favor prejudice and discrimination. As such, it seems plausible to argue that sexist humor may provide a social context that supports male sexual aggression towards women.

### *Prejudiced Norm Theory*

According to Ford and Ferguson (2004), a humorous communication activates a conversational rule of levity, resulting in a non-serious mindset on the part of the receiver, which prevents messages from being interpreted critically. By switching to a

non-serious mindset, the recipient accepts the local norm implied by the humor. Such humor may suggest that in the given context, discrimination of the disparaged target group need not be seen critically. According to the *prejudiced norm theory*, the perceiver of the joke uses the perceived norm of tolerance of discrimination for self-regulation, which results in greater personal tolerance of discrimination. Previous research findings have shown that sexist jokes can encourage the tolerance and expression of subtle discrimination among men high in hostile sexism (Ford and Fergusson 2004; Ford, Boxer, Armstrong & Edel, 2008). Ford et al. (2008) found that after exposure to sexist jokes, individuals high (vs. low) in HS were less willing to donate money to a women's organization. These findings support the claim that individuals who display high levels of HS are more prone to engage in different forms of discrimination against women following exposure to sexist humor.

Research has also shown that individuals who are high (vs. low) in HS are more approving of sexist humor (e.g. Ford, Wentzel & Lorion, 2001; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998) and were more apt to repeat female-disparaging jokes to friends (Thomas & Esses, 2004). Participants high in HS show a greater tolerance of a sexist event to the extent to which they adjust to social norms as a source of self-regulation (Ford et al., 2001). Indeed, Ford et al. (2001) empirically confirmed that the perception of a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination amongst men high in HS guides their evaluation of imagined sexist behavior.

Recent research (Romero-Sánchez, Durán, Carretero-Dios, Megías, & Moya, 2010) reported that the perceived averseness but not the amusement caused by sexist jokes increased the self-reported rape proclivity in male university students. However, this study did not yield significant findings in support of prejudiced norm theory. The current paper sets out to provide evidence for this missing link in the published literature. We propose that the local norm provided by sexist jokes frees up men who are already high (vs. low) in hostile sexism to report a willingness to commit acts of sexual aggression that are highly socially undesirable.

### *The Present Research*

The research conducted by Ford and colleagues so far has exclusively focused on tolerance of sexist discrimination and sexual harassment as a result of exposure to sexist humor (e.g. Ford et al., 2001, 2008). Ford and his colleagues have used vignettes in order to introduce sexist versus non-sexist jokes and to describe a critical incident of sexist behavior. Participants' perceptions of the sexist behavior after they have been exposed to the jokes are then assessed. However, to our knowledge there has been no research undertaken to assess the propensity to commit sexual violence within the framework of prejudiced norm theory. As such, the present research was conducted to examine whether exposure to sexist jokes would result in increased levels of self-reported rape proclivity among men.

Previous research has also shown that men who score high (vs. low) on HS report higher levels of rape proclivity in acquaintance (vs. stranger) rape situations (Abrams et al., 2003). Abrams and colleagues argue that individuals who are high in HS are more likely to report high levels of rape proclivity in situations where such behavior may be viewed as justified. Therefore, if it is the case that exposure to sexist humor creates a local norm that is tolerant of discrimination, then individuals who are high (vs. low) in

HS are likely to express a higher level of proclivity to commit rape after being exposed to sexist rather than non-sexist jokes.

We restrict the focus of the current research to men since recent rape statistics (Black et al., 2011; Hall & Innes, 2010; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006) indicate that women are largely victims of rape and sexual assault while, in the vast majority of cases (> 90%; including cases with male victims), men are perpetrators. Given these figures, we focus on male samples to assess self-reported rape proclivity as men are more likely to rape than women (Black et al., 2011).

In this paper, we examine whether exposure to sexist jokes can lead hostile sexist men to report a higher propensity to commit acts of sexual violence against women. We report three studies that test the hypothesis that sexist humor strengthens the relationship between hostile sexism and rape proclivity. Such an extension is important because it demonstrates that the effects of exposure to sexist jokes are much more serious than previously reported. In Study 1, male participants were exposed to either sexist or non-sexist jokes<sup>1</sup> after which their levels of self-reported rape proclivity were assessed. We predicted that participants would report higher levels of rape proclivity after exposure to sexist versus non-sexist jokes. Study 2 and Study 3 were online studies in which we examined the role of hostile sexism. In these studies, participants first completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) before being exposed to the sexist or non-sexist jokes and then completing the rape proclivity measure. We hypothesized that the relationship between HS and rape proclivity would be stronger after exposure to sexist versus non-sexist jokes.

## **Study 1 Method**

### *Participants*

Ninety-six male students from the University of Kent (*mean age* = 22.65, *SD* = 3.07) volunteered to participate in this study. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 40 years, with 86.5% of participants being twenty-five years old or younger.

### *Design and Procedure*

This study utilized a between-participants design with type of joke (sexist vs. non-sexist jokes) as the independent variable. The dependent variable was the participants' level of self-reported rape proclivity. The experimenter approached potential participants at various sitting places on campus. Participants who volunteered to participate were randomly assigned to either the sexist joke condition (*n* = 48) or the non-sexist joke condition (*n* = 48). After filling in the demographic details, participants were presented with the jokes and asked to read and rate the jokes in terms of their levels of funniness and sexism (see Viki, Thomae, Cullen, & Fernandez, 2007). In the sexist joke condition, participants rated three sexist jokes and one non-sexist joke, whereas in the non-sexist joke condition participants rated three non-sexist jokes and one sexist joke.

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<sup>1</sup> Since one experimental condition included three non-sexist and one sexist joke (non-sexist jokes condition) while the other experimental condition included three sexist and one non-sexist joke (sexist jokes condition), it would probably be more appropriate to talk about varying degrees of exposure to sexist jokes. However, for ease of reading and writing we will use the shorthand "sexist jokes condition" and "non-sexist jokes condition" throughout the paper.

After rating the jokes, participants completed the measures based on the five scenarios of the rape proclivity scale. The experimenter collected the questionnaire once participants had completed it, thanked them for their participation, and debriefed them.

### *Materials*

The participants in our study were presented with four jokes to rate in terms of their funniness and sexism. The jokes were selected on the basis of a pilot study in which we made sure that the sexist and non-sexist jokes were perceived as equally funny; but that the sexist jokes were rated as significantly more sexist in comparison to the non-sexist jokes (Viki et al. 2007; see Appendix A for the list of jokes used in this study).

In order to assess rape proclivity, we utilized the measure developed by Bohner et al. (1998). In this measure, participants are presented with five written date rape scenarios. An example scenario reads:

“Imagine you are a firm's Personnel Manager. You get on especially well with a new female member of staff. At the end of a busy week, you invite her out to dinner and take her home afterwards. As you want to spend some more time in her company, you suggest she might ask you in for a coffee. Next to her on the sofa, you start fondling her and kissing her. She tries to move out of reach, but you tell her that her career prospects stand to be enhanced by her being on good terms with her boss. In due course she seems to have accepted this, and she doesn't resist when you have sex with her.”

Participants were then asked to imagine themselves in the same position as the man in the scenario and to answer the question “Would you have behaved like this in this situation?” (1, *not at all*; 2, *rather not*; 3, *don't know*; 4, *rather yes*; 5, *very much*) for each scenario. This rape proclivity index yielded a good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ) and we averaged the five items for each participants for further analysis.

### **Study 1 Results**

An analysis of variance indicated that the sexist jokes were perceived as being slightly funnier than the non-sexist jokes. However, and as intended, this difference did not reach statistical significance ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = 1.99$  and  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 1.74$  respectively;  $F(1,94) = 3.45$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The analysis also revealed that the sexist jokes were rated as being significantly more sexist ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 2.41$ ) than the neutral jokes ( $M = 1.81$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ;  $F(1,94) = 40.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

A between-subjects ANOVA was performed on the rape proclivity question to test for the effects of exposure to sexist versus non-sexist jokes. A significant effect of joke condition was obtained,  $F(1,94) = 9.04$ ,  $p = .003$ . As predicted, participants who were exposed to sexist jokes reported higher levels of rape proclivity ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) in comparison to participants who were exposed to non-sexist jokes ( $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = .83$ ).

## **Study 1 Discussion**

The results of Study 1 indicate that exposure to sexist (vs. non-sexist) humor leads males to report higher levels of rape proclivity. These results are consistent with Ford and Ferguson's (2004) prejudiced norm theory and indicate that exposure to sexist jokes may provide a context in which men feel comfortable to express negative behavioral tendencies toward women. Although the results of Study 1 are interesting, there is potential to extend the research by examining the role of sexist attitudes. Previous research indicates that men who are high in HS report higher levels of rape proclivity in comparison to men who are low in HS (Abrams et al., 2003). Other research has also shown that individuals who score high (vs. low) in HS are more likely to enjoy sexist jokes (Ford et al., 2001). The results of our first study support the notion that exposure to sexist humor creates a local norm in which men express high levels of rape proclivity. Thus, it is sensible to assume that individuals who are high (vs. low) in HS are likely to express higher levels of proclivity to commit rape after being exposed to sexist rather than non-sexist jokes. We conducted a second study to further explore this hypothesis.

## **Study 2 Method**

We conducted Study 2 using the World Wide Web. Research has shown that a tendency toward socially desirable responding is less of a concern in anonymous internet surveys compared to paper and pencil surveys (Joinson, 1999; Richman, Kiesler, Weisband, & Drasgow, 1999). Feigelson and Dwight (2000) argue that computers promote an increased feeling of anonymity and have the advantage that participants do not need to hand over their responses to another individual and therefore, do not need to fear negative evaluation. As such, for purposes of our second study, we collected data using the World Wide Web.

### *Participants*

One hundred and seven men (*mean age* = 22.33, *SD* = 4.57) volunteered to participate in this online study. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 50 years, with 86% of participants being twenty-five years old or younger.

### *Design, Materials and Procedure*

Study 2 used a between-subjects design with HS, BS, and joke condition as independent variables. The dependent variable was participants' self-reported rape proclivity. The study was accessible via a link, which was sent to student mailing lists by email or was posted into student newsgroups at the University of Kent and the University of Cambridge. All participants were students at either of these institutions. Once participants clicked on the link, they were randomly assigned to either one of the two joke conditions.

After filling in their demographic details, we asked participants to complete a measure of social desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). This scale consisted of five items selected from the original Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). The five items were chosen on the basis of pilot research (Thomae, 2004). An example item is: "There have been times when I have been jealous of the good



fortune of others.” Participants responded to the items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). After completing the social desirability measures, participants then completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996). The ASI is a 22-item measure of individual levels of ambivalent sexism. The scale is comprised of two 11-item sub-scales (HS and BS). Example items are: “Women exaggerate problems at work” (HS) and “Women should be cherished and protected” (BS). Participants also responded to this scale on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

Once participants had completed these two questionnaires they were transferred to the next screen where they were asked to read and rate the jokes listed. The rest of the procedure was the same as in Study 1; participants were asked to complete the five scenarios of the rape proclivity scale, thanked for their participation, and debriefed.

## **Study 2 Results**

### *Preliminary Analyses*

The internal consistencies of all the measures used in this study ranged from acceptable to good (social desirability:  $\alpha = .69$ , HS:  $\alpha = .93$ , BS:  $\alpha = .85$ , rape proclivity:  $\alpha = .66$ ). Correlation analyses yielded a significant correlation between the two ambivalent sexism subscales,  $r(105) = .36$ ,  $p < .001$ . This finding is in line with previous research (e.g. Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2000). In order to establish whether the jokes in the two conditions were perceived as equally funny but unequally sexist, we conducted one-way ANOVAs. Participants rated the sexist jokes ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ) to be equally funny as the non-sexist jokes ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ;  $F(1,105) = 0.00$ ,  $p = .966$ ); but significantly more sexist ( $M = 6.40$ ,  $SD = 2.22$ ) than the non-sexist jokes ( $M = 1.39$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ,  $F(1,105) = 229.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### *Rape Proclivity*

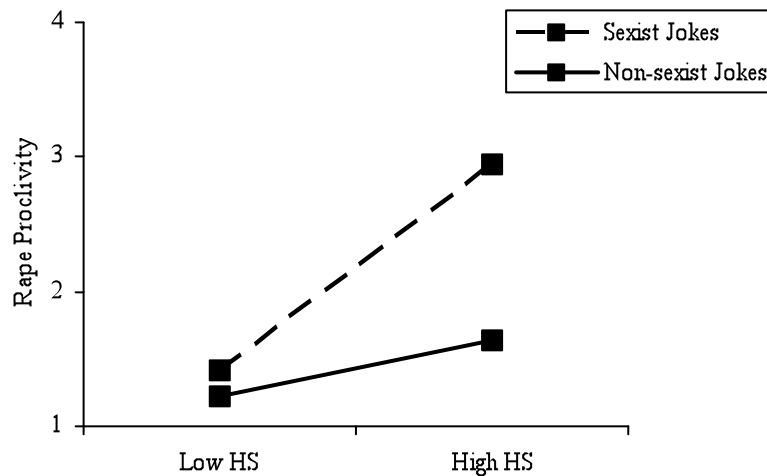
Multiple regression analysis was performed on the rape proclivity index. The variables were entered into the regression model simultaneously as shown in Table 1. As can be seen in Table 1, HS, BS and joke condition significantly predicted rape proclivity. These results indicate that the higher one’s level of HS, the greater their rape proclivity. The results also demonstrate that those exposed to sexist jokes reported higher levels of rape proclivity ( $M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) compared to participants who were exposed to non-sexist jokes ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ). In line with our predictions, the interaction effect between HS and condition on rape proclivity was significant. All the other main and interaction effects remained non-significant.

**Table 1.** Results from Regression Analysis predicting Rape Proclivity Index in Study 2

Regression Step	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Social Desirability	-.03	-0.38	.706
BS	.20	2.07	.041
HS	.36	3.79	.000
Condition	.22	2.24	.027
BS*HS	.13	1.41	.159
BS*Condition	-.03	-0.33	.742
HS*Condition	2.01	2.01	.047
BS*HS*Condition	.28	0.28	.784

Note: N = 107.

We performed simple slopes analysis to further examine the significant interaction between HS and joke condition. In line with our predictions, the relationship between HS and rape proclivity was significant in the sexist joke condition,  $\beta = .51$ ,  $t = 4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ . This relationship was also significant in the neutral joke condition, but was weaker than in the sexist joke condition,  $\beta = .31$ ,  $t = 2.47$ ,  $p = .017$ . These results are in line with our hypotheses: exposure to sexist jokes appears to strengthen the relationship between HS and rape proclivity.



**Figure 1.** Interaction between hostile sexism and joke condition for rape proclivity in Study 2.

### Study 2 Discussion

The current study investigated whether the exposure to sexist versus non-sexist jokes moderates the relationship between HS and rape proclivity. Overall, the results of this online experiment indicate that for individuals high in HS, rape proclivity is amplified by exposure to sexist humor. These findings are consistent with the results of previous research (e.g., Ford et al., 2001) and are in line with the predictions of the prejudiced norm theory (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). It appears to be case that when a norm tolerant to discrimination is established via exposure to sexist humor, high hostile sexists but not low hostile sexists report a higher proclivity to rape.

Beyond this, we replicated findings by LaFrance and Woodzicka (1998) and Thomas and Esses (2004) concerning the relationship between ambivalent sexism and the perception of funniness of sexist jokes. We confirmed that high HS individuals perceived sexist humor as funnier than low HS individuals, whereas BS was not related to the perceived funniness of the sexist jokes. Moreover, neither BS nor HS were found to be related to the perception of the funniness of neutral jokes. These findings suggest that enjoyment of sexist humor is specifically related to hostility toward women.

### **Study 3**

Although, the above two studies provide an interesting set of results there is a potential limitation to the conclusions we can reach on the basis of these data. A cursory glance at the jokes in Appendix A reveals that two of the sexist jokes we used in Study 2 contain some sexual content. In contrast, only one non-sexist joke contained sexual content. As such, it is possible that the sexual nature of the two sexist jokes may have resulted in the effects we report above. It is inevitable that sexist jokes will contain content implying women's inferior social status and male superiority; this is what makes the jokes sexist. However, the jokes do not necessarily need to contain sexual information or imply male dominance in sexual encounters. With these notions in mind, we selected the jokes for a third study.

Also, in the previous two studies, participants were rating the jokes in terms of their funniness and sexism. It is possible that the sexism ratings may have alerted participants to the goals of our research and weakened our effects. As such, in Study 3 we had participants rating the jokes in terms of their funniness only, before they responded to the rape proclivity measure. We expected to replicate the findings of Study 2, i.e., a stronger relationship between HS and rape proclivity in the sexist jokes (vs. non-sexist jokes) condition.

### **Study 3 Method**

#### *Participants*

Two hundred and eighteen male students (*mean age* = 19.85, *SD* = 5.89) volunteered to participate in this online study. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 51 years, with 95% of participants being twenty-five years old or younger.

#### *Design, Materials and Procedure*

Participants for this study were recruited via the research participation scheme at the University of Kent. We emailed students the link to the study and asked them to take part. Study 3 used the same methodology as Study 2. In contrast to Study 2, however, our participants only rated the funniness of the listed jokes. These jokes were also different to those used in Study 2. We went back to the jokes from the pilot study (Thomae, 2004) and selected four sexist and four non-sexist jokes that contained no sexual content. As in Study 2, the selection criteria for these jokes were similar funniness ratings for all eight jokes, but distinct sexism ratings for the four sexist (vs. non-sexist) jokes. In line with these criteria, the four selected sexist jokes were rated as equally funny ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 2.18$ ) to the four non-sexist jokes ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ),  $F(1,27) = 0.46$ ,  $p > .50$  but as

significantly more sexist ( $M = 7.13$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ) than the non-sexist jokes ( $M = 1.41$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ),  $F(1,27) = 68.12$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Appendix B for the list of jokes used in this study).

We conducted a second pilot study to ensure that our jokes were free of any sexual content. Sixteen students were presented with the eight jokes and asked to indicate, on a 1-7 Likert scale, the extent to which the jokes contained sexual content. The sexist jokes were rated as having virtually no sexual content ( $M = 1.04$ ,  $SD = .14$ ). Similar ratings were also obtained for the four non-sexist jokes ( $M = 1.07$ ,  $SD = .22$ ). There was no significant difference between the sexist and non-sexist jokes with regards to sexual content,  $F(1,15) = 0.21$ ,  $p > .65$ . As such, we considered these jokes as suitable for Study 3. After rating the jokes, participants completed the five scenarios of the rape proclivity scale. At the end of the study, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

### Study 3 Results

#### *Preliminary Analyses*

As in Study 2, the internal consistencies of all the measures ranged from acceptable to good (social desirability scale  $\alpha = .77$ , HS:  $\alpha = .95$ ; BS:  $\alpha = .92$ , rape proclivity:  $\alpha = .90$ ). In line with previous research, correlation analyses yielded a significant correlation between the HS and BS,  $r(190) = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ . Social Desirability did not correlate significantly with HS ( $r(190) = -.02$ ,  $p = .804$ ), BS ( $r(190) = .02$ ,  $p = .737$ ) or Rape Proclivity ( $r(174) = .01$ ,  $p = .941$ ). A one-way ANOVA indicated that the jokes in the sexist joke condition ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 2.79$ ) were rated by the participants to be equally funny to the jokes in the non-sexist joke condition ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 2.46$ );  $F(1,217) = 2.17$ ,  $p > .14$ ).

A regression analysis examining the relationship between HS, BS, condition, and all possible interaction terms revealed an interesting set of findings, including significant main effects of hostile and benevolent sexism and a significant interaction between hostile sexism and condition. The findings of this regression analysis can be found in Table 2. Disentangling the significant HS by condition interaction revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between hostile sexism and the perceived funniness of sexist jokes ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $t = 3.47$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but a weaker, marginally significant relationship between hostile sexism and the perceived funniness of non-sexist jokes ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $t = 1.86$ ,  $p > .05$ ). These findings suggest that while BS was generally related to the perceived funniness of all the jokes, HS was specifically related to the perceived funniness of sexist jokes only. The results for HS are, therefore, in line with previous theorizing and research findings (e.g., Study 2 above; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998; Thomas & Esses, 2004).

**Table 2.** Results from Regression Analysis predicting Joke Funniness in Study 3

Regression Step	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Social Desirability	.230	3.651	.000
BS	.302	4.112	.000
HS	.198	2.681	.008
Condition	-.086	-1.224	.222
BS*HS	-.238	-3.551	.000
BS*Condition	.000	-0.001	.999
HS*Condition	-.162	-2.224	.027
BS*HS*Condition	-.042	-0.550	.583

### Rape Proclivity

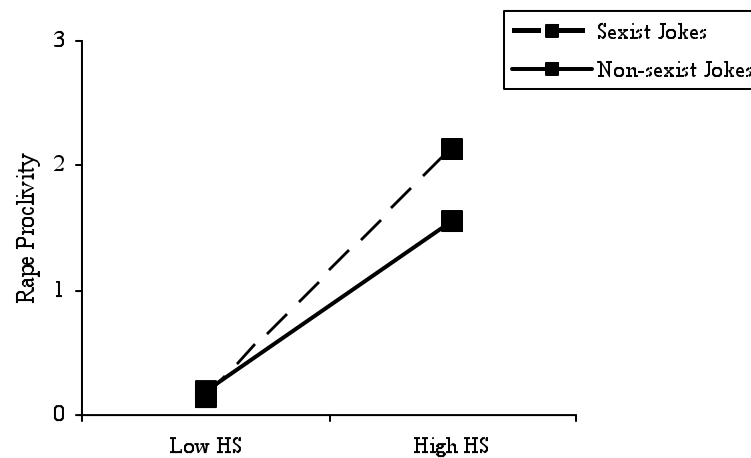
Multiple regression analysis was performed on the rape proclivity index. We entered the variables into the regression model as in Study 2. Table 3 shows that HS significantly predicted rape proclivity. There were no other main significant effects. We obtained our expected two-way interaction between joke condition and HS. We also obtained an unexpected interaction between HS and BS. None of the other interactions reached significance.

Simple slopes analyses further examined the significant interaction between HS and joke condition. In line with our predictions, the relationship between HS and rape proclivity was significant in the sexist joke condition,  $\beta = .69$ ,  $t = 9.235$ ,  $p < .001$ . In the neutral joke condition, the relationship between HS and rape proclivity was also significant but it was weaker than in the sexist joke condition,  $\beta = .48$ ,  $t = 6.06$ ,  $p < .001$ . The pattern of the above results is generally in line with our predictions. Exposure to sexist jokes strengthened the relationship between HS and rape proclivity.

**Table 3.** Results from Regression Analysis predicting Rape Proclivity Index in Study 3

Regression Step	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Social Desirability	.065	0.982	.327
BS	.091	1.079	.282
HS	.387	4.844	.000
Condition	.005	0.081	.936
BS*HS	.192	2.591	.010
BS*Condition	.029	0.350	.726
HS*Condition	.230	2.886	.004
BS*HS*Condition	.129	1.641	.102

We also performed simple slopes analyses to examine the significant interaction between HS and BS. This analysis was conducted by median splitting BS and revealed that the relationship between HS and rape proclivity was stronger for individuals low in BS,  $\beta = .62$ ,  $t = 8.07$ ,  $p < .001$ , than for individuals high in BS,  $\beta = .22$ ,  $t = 2.35$ ,  $p < .03$ . This pattern of results is interesting and unexpected; it suggests that BS may attenuate the effects of HS on rape proclivity.



**Figure 2.** Interaction between hostile sexism and joke condition for rape proclivity in Study 3.

### **Study 3 Discussion**

We conducted Study 3 to further examine whether the exposure to sexist versus non-sexist jokes moderates the relationship between HS and rape proclivity. In Study 3, we ensured that our jokes contained no sexual content. We found that exposure to sexist jokes strengthened the relationship between HS and rape proclivity. These findings are consistent with the results of Study 2 and further support the argument that when exposed to sexist humor, high hostile sexists but not low hostile sexists report a higher proclivity to rape.

However, in contrast to Study 2 and after removing the sexual content of the jokes in Study 3, there is no main effect of experimental condition on rape proclivity. Comparing the findings of Studies 1, 2, and 3, the sexual content of the jokes in Studies 1 and 2 seemed to have heightened participants' rape proclivity. This is not the case for the jokes without sexual content used in Study 3. Nevertheless, our data support what has been described as a person by situation interaction (Abrams et al., 2003; Ford et al., 2001; Wiener, Hurt, Russell, Mannen & Gasper, 1997), such that individual differences and situational factors jointly influence behavioral inclinations.

We also obtained an unexpected interaction between BS and HS. Our analyses seemed to indicate that the effect of HS on rape proclivity are stronger for individuals who are low (vs. high) in BS. Thus, it appears that BS attenuates the effects of HS on rape proclivity. However, caution must be taken in reaching this conclusion since this effect was not expected in Study 3 and was not obtained in Study 2. Further research is needed to explore the robustness of this effect.

### **General Discussion**

We conducted the current series of studies to examine whether exposure to sexist versus non-sexist humor would influence the levels of male self-reported rape proclivity. Overall, the results of our studies are in line with our predictions. Study 1 demonstrated that exposure to sexist humor results in increased levels of rape proclivity among male students. In Study 2, we explored the role of sexist hostility and found that exposure to sexist humor led to an increased level of rape proclivity for males who score high (vs. low) in HS. In Study 3, we replicated the result of Study 2 using sexist jokes that did not contain any sexual content. These results are in line with our hypotheses and support the argument that exposure to sexist humor may provide a situational norm in which men, especially those high in HS, feel comfortable to express their hostility towards women.

In contrast to Studies 1 and 2, removing the sexual content of the jokes in Study 3 led to a disappearance of the main effect of joke condition on rape proclivity. Our current findings seem to indicate that men's attitudes towards coercive sexual inclinations follow from two different pathways: The pathway we aimed to investigate in this paper is the person by situation interaction between the sexism in the jokes and hostile sexist attitudes. However, if the difference in the results we found in Studies 2 and 3 is more than a fluke effect, it is possible that sexual content further contributes to men's reported rape proclivity. Future research might wish to investigate this interesting and unexpected effect further.

The findings presented in this paper differ from the findings by Romero-Sanchez et al. (2010) in that they provide evidence for an interaction effect between participants' hostile sexism and joke condition on rape proclivity. Yet, our research differed in two key

aspects from the above research. First, we conducted Studies 2 and 3 online and there is evidence for differences in the results of online and paper and pencil research (Joinson 1999; Richman et al., 1999). Feigelson and Dwight (2000) for example argue that online responses tend to be more candid due to the fact that participants remain highly anonymous and do not have to hand over their responses to an experimenter. An additional difference lies within the samples. While Romero-Sanchez et al. (2010) employed a Spanish student sample; our samples consisted mainly of British students. Thus, future research may want to investigate the possibility of cultural differences impacting on the link between hostile sexism, sexist jokes, and rape proclivity (cf. Glick et al. 2000).

The current research findings extend previous research based on prejudiced norm theory (e.g., Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2001, 2002, 2008). Our findings extend on the proposition made by Ford and Ferguson (2004) that upon exposure to disparaging humor, highly prejudiced people should be “more likely to engage in subtle forms of discrimination” (pg. 90). The findings from our studies indicate that sexist jokes can not only encourage the tolerance and expression of subtle discrimination in men high in HS, but may also lead to a greater propensity to commit sexual violence against women. Therefore, the predictions made by prejudiced norm theory can be expanded to include tolerance of discrimination and the propensity to commit acts of violence against an out-group.

Our research also extends on the literature concerning the relationship between HS and self-reported likelihood of raping (Abrams et al., 2003; Viki et al., 2006). In Studies 2 and 3, the main effects of HS were consistently found on the rape proclivity index and this replicates the findings from earlier studies (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003). The research by Abrams et al. (2003) and Viki et al. (2006) took situational factors into account by distinguishing between stranger and acquaintance rape. The current research adds to these findings by showing that the impact of hostile sexist attitudes on the self-reported rape proclivity amongst men can be amplified by exposing men to sexist jokes.

It is important to note that the current research focused on the self-reported propensity to commit acts of sexual violence in certain social situations. Our research does not provide conclusive evidence that exposure to sexist jokes results in an increase in the occurrence of actual rapes. We cannot think of a way of conducting ethical research studies that explore such a question more directly. As such, we can only propose that individuals who indicate a high likelihood of committing rape may be more likely to commit acts of sexual violence in comparison to individuals who do not highlight such a propensity. In this regard, our findings suggest that exposure to sexist humor can only encourage such individuals.

Despite the above limitations, the results from the current research indicate that sexist jokes can be situational amplifiers of sexual violence against women. Such sexual violence constitutes a very real, material issue in women’s lives. Not only do victims of rape suffer physical injuries (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases, scratches, bruises, dislocated joints, broken bones, or chipped teeth; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006) but also psychological problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, sleep difficulties, and substance abuse; Nishith, Resick & Mueser, 2001; Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock & Walsh, 1992). Moreover, rape and sexual violence lead to significant health care costs and loss of time at work (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006), harming victims, their employers, and society at large. For non-victimized women, rape-prevention strategies can severely limit their personal freedom (Day, 1995). For example, women may be asked to avoid

certain areas and to not walk in the dark at night; to stay sober and to dress “sensibly” and comfortably so as to be able to run away or fight (Day, 1995).

If a person holds hostile sexist attitudes, then exposure to sexist jokes may create a situation which not only enhances tolerance of discrimination against women, but also appears to elevate the propensity to commit rape. These results sound a note of caution towards the use of sexist jokes in social settings. Especially for individuals holding prejudices against certain groups, jokes can have a negative impact on the treatment of members of the disparaged groups. As these individuals appear to enjoy disparaging jokes more, they may be more likely to retell these jokes to others (Thomas & Esses, 2004), which can create a circle of hostility and discrimination that culminates in physical violence against out-group members.

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## **APPENDIX A: STUDIES 1 AND 2 JOKES**

### **Non-Sexist Jokes**

Psychiatrist: What's your problem?

Patient: I think I'm a chicken.

Psychiatrist: How long has this been going on?

Patient: Ever since I was an egg!

How do you know when elephants have had sex in your house?

The trash can liners are missing!

What's the difference between a golfer and a skydiver?

A golfer goes whack... "Damn!" A skydiver goes "Damn!" ... whack.

Why was the leper stopped for speeding?

He couldn't take his foot off the accelerator!

### **Sexist Jokes**

Why are women like carpets? If you lay them properly the first time, you can walk all over them for years.

Why do women have small feet?

So they can get closer to the sink!

How many men does it take to change a light bulb?

None, let her do the dishes in the dark.

What is the best thing about a blowjob?

Ten minutes' silence.

## **APPENDIX B: STUDY 3 JOKES**

### **Non-Sexist Jokes**

Psychiatrist: What's your problem?

Patient: I think I'm a chicken.

Psychiatrist: How long has this been going on?

Patient: Ever since I was an egg!

“Armstrong,” the boss said, “I happen to know that you weren't sick yesterday, and the reason you didn't come to work was that you were out playing golf.” “That's a rotten lie!” Armstrong protested. “And I have the fish to prove it!”

Q: What's the difference between a golfer and a skydiver?

A: A golfer goes whack... “Damn!” A skydiver goes “Damn!” ... whack.

Q: Why was the leper stopped for speeding?

A: He couldn't take his foot off the accelerator!

### **Sexist Jokes**

Three women were granted one wish each by a genie. The first woman said, “I wish I was the smartest woman in the world.” And POOF, it came to be. The second woman said, “I wish I was ten times smarter than the smartest woman in the world.” And POOF, this too came to be. The third woman said, “I wish I was twenty times smarter than the smartest woman in the world.” .... And POOF, she was a man.

Q: How many men does it take to clean a toilet?

A: NONE-it's a woman's job.

Q: How many men does it take to change a light bulb?

A: None, let her do the dishes in the dark.

Q: If your wife comes out of the kitchen nagging, what's wrong?

A: Her chain is too long.